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VOL. 2 ISSUE 6E/MW/W/C/JUNE 1967

#### DEPARTMENTS

- 4 From the Editor
- 14 Test Yourself
- 16 Bookshelf
- 20 The Short Short Story/ The Dying Knight  
by Edward D. Hoch
- 88 Quote and Unquote

#### FOOD

- 8 Dining in America  
by Franco Borghese

#### HEALTH

- 18 Feet: The Traveler's Achilles' Heel  
by Leslie R. Jones

#### FEATURES

- 24 Birdmen, Barnstormers and Their Flying Machines  
by Edward Jablonski
- 28 Global Godfrey  
by Beirne Lay Jr.
- 39 In Darkness Waiting  
by Jay Schiller
- 42 Instant Success Girl?
- 46 Yours, For Rent  
by Florence Stevenson
- 48 The Show That Money Couldn't Buy

#### HUMOR

- 32 SST! Look—It's Super-Jet!  
by Mort Gerberg
- 40 On a Clear Day You Can See Your Own Terrible Fate  
by William Johnston

#### FICTION

- 34 Hot Air Pilot  
by Jack Ritchie

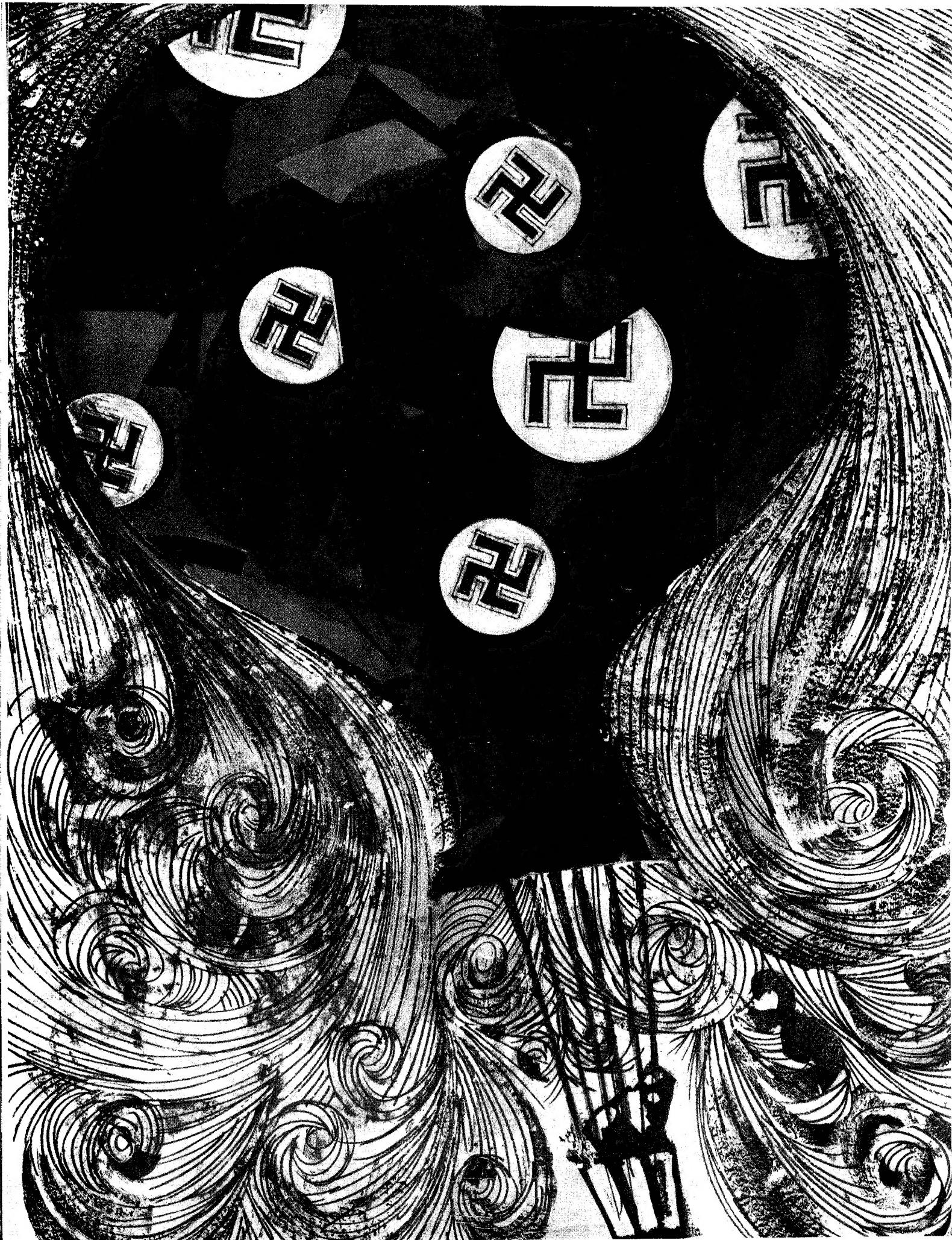
#### OUR COVER

Artist Don Ivan Punchatz uses realism and surrealism in this allegorical depiction of man's continuous pursuit of flight for our special air issue.



#### PHOTO CREDITS

p. 29 Aero Commander/p. 42 PIP Photos-Lee Thody/p. 48 (top) Columbia Records; (bottom) Allan Dean Walker/p. 49 (top) Culver; (bottom) Cole Porter collection



# Hot air pilot

by Jack Ritchie

*Unteroffizier* Benecke reported to *Kommandant* Reinholdt. "Sir, the prisoners have started another tunnel. This time it apparently begins under the main kitchen."

"Where is it going?" Reinholdt asked.

"It is still a little too early to tell, sir. But it seems logical that it will turn toward the wall near the northwest tower."

Reinholdt dismissed him. "Very well, Benecke. Keep me informed on the progress."

*Kommandant* Reinholdt, a gray-haired former schoolteacher who had last heard a shot fired in anger during World War I, turned to *Leutnant* Studt. "*Leutnant*, you seem a bit surprised that I did not immediately order some kind of action?"

Studt, convalescing from a leg wound received on the eastern front and assigned to temporary light duty at Mecklin Castle, admitted as much.

Reinholdt smiled. "*Leutnant*, these men must be kept occupied with something they believe is of importance, and correspondence courses are not enough. If they are not kept busy, they will fall into all kinds of depressions and emotional illness, and this is not healthy. And so I let them dig their tunnels and pretend that I do not know."

He lit a cigar. "One cannot dig silently in this rocky earth, and we have sound-detection devices. We know from the very beginning when a tunnel is started, and where. I permit the prisoners to get within a dozen feet of success, and then I have my guards 'accidentally' discover the work. This may seem cruel, but it is not meant to be."

*Kommandant* Reinholdt walked to the window and looked down at the courtyard.

"Mecklin Castle. It was built eleven hundred years ago to keep people out and now we must use it to keep people in. I have here roughly 200 American officers who are prisoners of war. All of them have been previously apprehended attempting to escape from the conventional camps, and it has been thought wise to transfer them here where the security is greater. They have been quite busy, these Americans, but not one of them has yet managed to escape."

Reinholdt exhaled cigar smoke. "And none of them will. I personally guarantee that."

Captain Charles Hendricks, a big-shouldered man who had been in Mecklin Castle less than a week, moved down the bench to get more of the courtyard sun. "You mean that in almost two years not one of you jokers managed to get out of here?"

Lieutenant Carson shrugged. "So what's the difference now? In another month or so this war will be over and we can all walk out of here without stirring up any sweat."

Hendricks scowled. "How's something like that going to look in the history books? Not a single American bright enough to escape."

Carson regarded him tolerantly. "If you're all hot about getting your name in print, why don't you go over to Section B? I hear they're starting another tunnel."

*continued*

Hendricks rejected that. "That's not the way to get out of here. Tunnels are for the foot people. Not Air Force."

Carson, a slight, fair man and also Air Force, smiled faintly. "We tried smuggling our people out of here under trucks, in garbage cans, disguised as guards—you name it. Nothing ever worked. But you think you got a new idea?"

Hendricks grunted. "Like I said, for an Air Force man, there's only one way to get out of here."

"Flying, I suppose?"

"Why not?"

"You got an airplane up your sleeve?"

"No airplane."

"You wave your arms and think positive?"

Hendricks scowled again. "How about a balloon?"

There was a long moment of silence and then Carson said, "You're crazy."

"What's so crazy about a balloon?" Hendricks demanded. "I can see that what this place has been needing for a long time is a shot of imagination. All we need is some cloth for the balloon, a little rope and a basket for the passenger."

Carson mulled over the idea again. "Damn it," he said finally, "it just might work. We'll take it up with the escape committee."

Captain Hendricks agreed, unsmilingly. "Just remember that this is my baby. My idea."

Carson regarded him mildly. "Don't worry, Captain, nobody's going to beat you out of the credit."

That evening Captain Hendricks presented his plan to the escape committee of Section C for consideration and approval.

Colonel Stranahan, a tall West Pointer, cleared his throat. "What do you intend to put into this balloon to make it rise? We've done some first-class scrapping in our time to get materials for escape attempts, but I just don't see how we'll be able to come up with helium or hydrogen. Do you have any ideas on the subject, Captain?"

Hendricks thought about it and colored slightly. "No, sir."

Carson spoke up. "I understand, sir, that in the old days balloons were inflated with hot air."

Stranahan smiled faintly. "Not getting personal, Lieutenant, but where are we going to get this hot air?"

36 "Why not from a chimney?" Carson

asked. "This old castle is loaded with chimneys. If we stoke up our stoves, we ought to be able to create plenty of hot air."

Stranahan rubbed an ear speculatively. "How are you going to get the hot air into the balloon?"

"We take the balloon onto the roof and connect it with one of the chimneys," Carson said.

"Really? And while we're filling this thing with hot air, what are the guards going to be doing? Looking up and admiring us?"

"Well," Hendricks said thoughtfully, "we'll need a night when there is absolutely no moonlight."

Stranahan agreed dryly. "Darkness does seem necessary. But you forget that the area would still be lit up by the usual searchlights, area lights and so on."

There was a silence until Stranahan himself came up with an answer. "There are no lights at all during the air-raid alarms. We're blacked out and confined to our quarters. Suppose we wait until one of the alarms and then carry the bag up to the roof and begin stoking the fires. I've been keeping an offhand record of the air-raid alarms for the past few weeks and the length of time we've been blacked out has averaged out to four hours. Is that enough time to inflate your balloon, Captain?"

"I really don't know, sir," Hendricks said uneasily.

Stranahan shrugged. "I guess that's a chance we'll have to take." He pondered over the plan a bit more. "Even uninflated, I imagine the balloon will still be rather large, so we'll sew it together in that tunnel we started six months ago but had to abandon because we hit solid rock." He looked at Hendricks again. "We're fairly close to the border. I suppose that once you get aloft, you'll steer for Switzerland?"

"Yes, sir," Hendricks said confidently. "Head for Switzerland. That was my plan."

Lieutenant Carson reached for a cigarette. "You can't steer a free balloon, Captain. It just follows the wind currents. However, the prevailing winds here are south southwest—toward Switzerland—and that's where they ought to take you after all."

Hendricks addressed Colonel Stranahan. "With your permission, sir, I think that we ought to keep this strictly a Section C project."

"We should? Why?"

"Well, sir, we're all Air Force in this building, and it seems to me that this is particularly an Air Force project. Suppose some of the other sections decided to imitate us? They might get one of their men out of here before we do."

Colonel Stranahan nodded. "I guess you have a point there, Hendricks. Very well, this will be an Air Force show and limited to Section C. Not a word of this to anyone else. Now . . . what kind of a fabric do we need for this balloon?"

"Silk or muslin, sir," Hendricks said. "I believe I read that someplace, sir."

Stranahan nodded. "We'll probably have to coat it with something that won't allow the hot air to escape. But we've got men in this building who can concoct 180-proof joy juice in their still, so I think they ought to be able to come up with some kind of varnish."

Hendricks was pleased. "In the Civil War, during the siege of Vicksburg, the women contributed their silk dresses, which were sewed up into a real working balloon."

Colonel Stranahan sighed. "We don't have any women here, much less dresses. So where the hell are we going to get silk? Or muslin?"

Finally, Carson raised his hand. "I believe I have an idea, sir."

*Unteroffizier* Benecke saluted. Reinholdt looked up. "What is it?"

"Sir, the flags have been stolen."

Reinholdt's mouth dropped open. "From the flagstaffs?"

"No, sir. Those are still up there. But all the others in the flag locker are gone."

Reinholdt frowned. "If I remember correctly, we had quite a supply. You mean *all* of them are gone?"

Benecke nodded. "The complete supply, including the very large ceremonial flags that we had in case *Der Führer* ever decided to visit . . ."

*Leutnant* Studt stepped forward. "Sir, I will search the entire castle immediately."

Reinholdt sighed. "I suppose so. Though when you have been here as long as I have, you will realize that once something has been stolen, its recovery is almost an impossible task."

"But, sir," Studt said, "the flags must constitute a considerable bulk."

Reinholdt agreed. "However, this bulk can be distributed into dozens of hiding places. The walls of Mecklin

*continued on page 76*

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Pilot continued from page 36

Castle have become almost like a honeycomb." He shook his head. "No, Lieutenant, once something is gone, it is gone."

"But why should the prisoners want to steal our flags?" Studt asked.

Kommandant Reinholdt smiled patiently. "You must learn to appreciate the prisoner's mentality. He is like a naughty child who will steal anything at all if it is not guarded, even if he has not the slightest use for it. It is simply the principle of the thing."

Lieutenant Carson re-threaded his needle. "I've been thinking about weight."

"What about it?" Hendricks asked.

"How much will this balloon be able to lift?"

Hendricks was irritated. "I don't know. But if it lifts me, that's enough."

"Sure," Carson continued, "but you weigh around 190 and that might bring you down before you get to the Swiss border. Why don't we pick somebody lighter?"

Hendricks regarded him suspiciously. "Like you?"

"No," Carson said, "I wouldn't voluntarily set foot in anything that doesn't have a motor. I mean that in the interest of the project, maybe we ought to send up someone lighter. Like Lieutenant Stebbins from Section E. He's about the skinniest little man around here."

"Forget it," Hendricks snapped. "He's Quartermaster Corps. When this balloon goes up, it's going to carry 190 pounds of Air Force."

It was a warm, dark night in early May when the air-raid sirens sounded and the prisoners were secured in their quarters. Hendricks, Carson, Stranahan and four previously selected men quickly retrieved the deflated balloon from its hiding place in the tunnel and carried it up to the roof. They fitted the bag-opening to a frame over the chimney and laid the bag itself in the long roof-valley.

At 2 A.M., three and a half hours later, Colonel Stranahan heard the faint sound of airplane motors. "Our planes are coming back," he whispered. "That means we have about half an hour at the most. Get the bag away from the chimney as quickly as possible and hitch up the basket."

Ten minutes passed before Captain continued on page 84

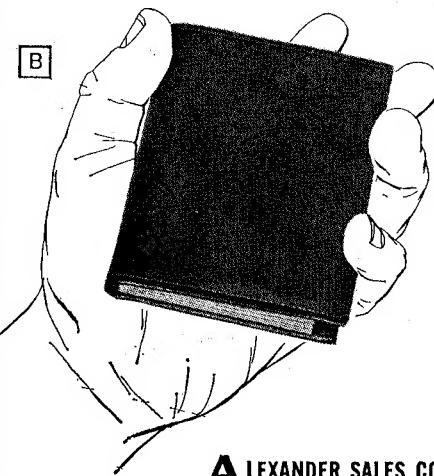
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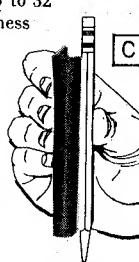
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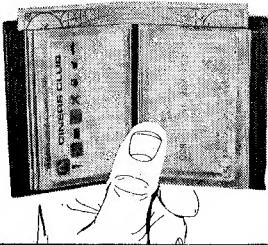
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Pilot continued from page 76

Hendricks eased himself into the basket. "Let go all the ropes," he commanded.

After a half-minute of dark silence, Hendricks hissed again: "Damn it, I said let go of the ropes!"

There was a hurried conference and then Lieutenant Carson spoke up. "Everybody did let go of the ropes. The balloon's just not taking off."

Colonel Stranahan sighed. "Okay, Hendricks, get out. We'll try Carson."

"But, sir—" Hendricks protested.

"That's an order," Colonel Stranahan snapped. "We don't have time to argue. Carson, take his place."

But even with Carson—40 pounds lighter—in the basket, the balloon refused to rise.

Carson climbed out. "I have the feeling that it's just a question of a few pounds—but I'm the lightest man in the section."

Colonel Stranahan agreed. "Well, I guess we'll just have to deflate the balloon again for the time being and figure out how to load it with more hot air the next time we try. I hope we get another chance like this before the war ends."

"Wait a minute, Colonel," Hendricks said hastily. "Why don't we send up Lieutenant Stebbins?"

"Stebbins? I don't seem to remember anybody by that name."

"He's in Section E, sir, and just about the size of a jockey."

"Not Air Force, is he?"

"No, sir. Quartermaster Corps. But this is no time for intraservice rivalries, don't you agree, sir?"

Colonel Stranahan nodded. "I guess you're right. Lieutenant Carson, get Stebbins—and hurry."

Carson darted downstairs, let himself out of a ground-floor window and crawled in pitch darkness to the next building. Softly, he tapped on one of the windows.

When Carson returned to the roof of Section C, he led a stumbling Lieutenant Stebbins by the hand. "I can't see a thing," Stebbins complained, "but I feel a wind."

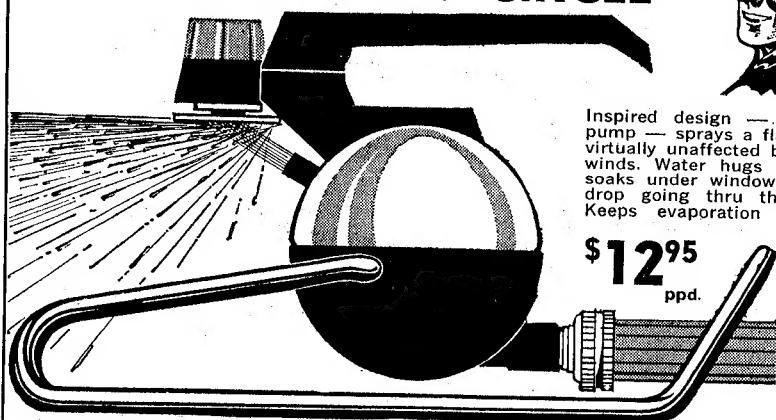
Captain Hendricks took his arm and guided Stebbins over the roof. "Just step up and hold onto these ropes."

"What is this all about?" Stebbins asked plaintively. "It feels like some kind of a basket."

Captain Hendricks spoke quickly. "Lieutenant, you are about to become the first—and probably the only—

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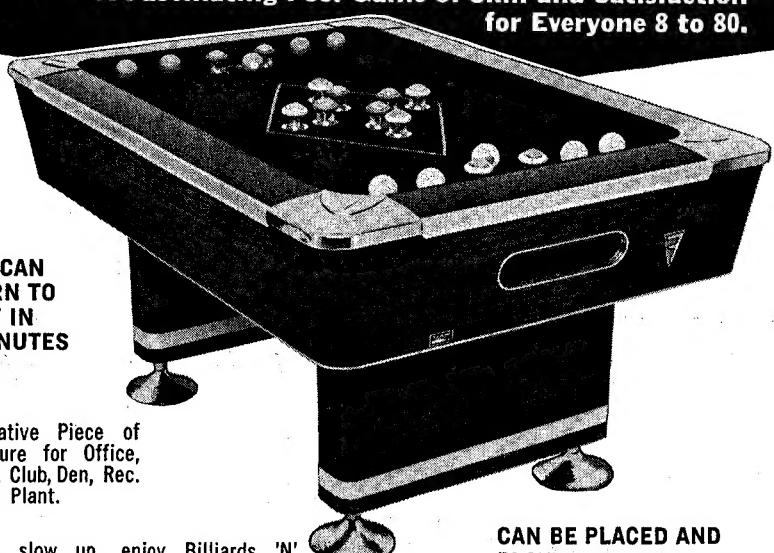
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Then Captain Hendricks leaned closer to Stebbins' ear and whispered fiercely: "You'll be talking to a lot of reporters soon and there's one more thing I want you to remember. The name is Capt. Charles Hendricks and this whole operation is my baby, my brainchild. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't be here right now."

Hendricks stepped back. "All right, men, let go of the ropes."

There was a sudden whoosh and a thin, rapidly fading scream.

"Well," Stranahan said, "I guess we did it."

Carson agreed. "The way that thing took off, I don't believe it was really a matter of weight after all. I'll bet the basket was caught on something. How high do you think Stebbins will go, Colonel?"

"I don't know," Stranahan said, "but I hope he was wearing a jacket."

One hour after sunrise, Stebbins and the balloon landed in Switzerland.

Two days later, the war ended and Kommandant Reinholdt invited Captain Hendricks to his quarters.

"I understand that you were the author of this unique escape," Reinholdt said. "I must congratulate you on your most eye-catching balloon. Undoubtedly your name will go down in history." He pushed a bottle of cognac toward Hendricks. "A drink?"

Hendricks half-filled his glass and drained it. He poured again. "Damn it," he growled, "if I ever get my hands on Stebbins, I'll kill him."

"Now, now," Reinholdt said soothingly. "The war is over. Let bygones be bygones."

"That damn traitor!"

Reinholdt shook his head. "He was not a traitor. Stebbins—or Hans Wolff, as our army records list him—was a loyal German citizen performing a distasteful job for his country."

Reinholdt smiled. "I have 200 bona fide Americans in Mecklin Castle and yet it was your misfortune to choose my camp spy. It is enough to make a man cry, is it not?"

And after a few more drinks, Hendricks did just that. ☐